

The Memory Problem in Karmic Justice

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Introduction

Although recognized in Indian religions as inseparable, karma cannot be studied through physical evidence, as it is possible with reincarnation. Parapsychology has tried to seek evidence of the latter's existence through the experience of near death, regressive hypnosis to past lives, xenoglossy, the survival of something after death, scars and marks on the body of people supposedly reincarnated, etc. These experiments are possible to be investigated empirically, since reincarnation is understood by those who support it as a phenomenon. While karma (action / reaction), in turn, is a fact, but tied to a concept that is not possible to study empirically, because it is based on a concept of morality, skill and justice. Therefore an idea abstract created by the judgment of values, although Indian doctrines insist that it is a natural law of cause and effect, and not just a human concept, as we will discuss below.

Thus, there is no empirical research on the attempt to prove the existence of karma, such as the research of Ian Stevenson (1918-2007) and other parapsychologists, with the intention of showing physical clues to the possibility of reincarnation. With karma, such research is not possible, for karma is a concept of skill and justice behind the action and return of the action committed before, so that it can be discussed, but not scientifically tested, as parapsychologists have tried with reincarnation.

In general, these discussions of karma have as their starting point and as an accepted idea the fact that karma exists. So, there are many more debates, carried out by religious, by professors of religion, and by philosophers, never by scientists, about the details of karma operations (example: failure to remember past actions, proportion of crime and punishment in the next life, the appropriate time for punishment or reward for actions in past lives, etc.) than debates whether karma actually exists or not. If karma does not exist, these operations do not happen, which makes discussions useless. So in these debates, a number of ideas, things, and facts, which have no proof of their existence (rebirth, immortal soul, survival after death, heavenly plans, subtle bodies, hell, etc.) are introduced into the discussions, without before being discussed whether they exist or not (to know some about these debates, see: Reichenbach, 1989, Kaufman, 2005, Chadha, 2007 and McClelland, 2010, 136-52).

Indian doctrines insist that karma is not only a moral law, but also a natural law of cause and effect, but a natural law based on a judgment of value and a concept of ability. However, judgments of values and concepts of human abilities are not in nature.

In Indian conception, karma and reincarnation coexist in a mutual dependence. If reincarnation does not exist, then karma does not exist either. Therefore, the present difficulty in proving the occurrence of reincarnation makes it difficult also to demonstrate the existence of karma, with which karma persists as a dogma, despite the insistence of supporters that there is a

law behind karma such as the physical principle that every action causes a reaction.

The Meaning of Karma

The idea of action with the power of just retribution for the author responsible for the act, over time has spread and influenced different religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and, in more recent times, Theosophy, Modern Spiritism, as well as others less known. Despite the common ideas in each of the religions through which it has penetrated, the belief in karma has developed peculiarities in its explanation, so that it would be very extensive to deal with the distinctions here, the differences exist even among the sects of the same religion (see, O'Flaherty, 1980 and Reichenbach, 1989). Therefore, we will concentrate here only on the most common conceptions, as well as on the doctrines where the belief in karma represented the central theme: Indian religions, Theosophy and Spiritism.

In its broad sense, karma (Sanskrit: कर्मन् - *karman*; Páli: कम्म - *kamma*, term derived from the verbal root कृ- *kr* "to act", "to do", "to execute", "to cause")¹ is a noun in the neutral gender² that

¹ *Karma* (कर्म) is the inflected form in the nominative case of the noun in the neutral gender *karman* (कर्मन्) in the non-inflected form. Like Greek and classical Latin, Sanskrit has no prepositions ("from", "with", "for", "for", etc.), then in synthetic languages, unlike analytic languages, which have prepositions, the role of prepositions is replaced by the flexing of word terminations in order to replace prepositions. For example, when one wants to say "of *karma*", the flexed

means action in general, it can be a ritual action, the execution of a task, the fulfillment of a duty, a job, the exercise of a profession, etc. This is the sense of action devoid of moral cause, intention, and responsibility. In the strict sense, the meaning of karma that interests us here is that of karma associated with the power of action to create reactions and to reciprocate moral actions according to the responsibility of each individual, each society, each nation or even the whole humanity. This is the mode of action provided with karmic retribution (विपाकः - *vipākah*).³ The principle is that virtuous actions (कुशल - *kushala*) will bring favorable experiences, while immoral actions (अकुशल - *akushala*) will result in unfavorable experiences, in this life or in future lives, for the person in charge of the action. Something like the well-known saying: "everyone reaps what he sows". Not even karmic retribution happens in the same life. According to this doctrine, no one is able to escape from this Law (धर्म - *dharma*), because

form is "*karmanah*" (कर्मणः), in the genitive case; and to say the phrase "with *karma*" the inflected word is "*karmanā*" (कर्मणा), in the instrumental case. In Greek there are five cases of flexion, in Latin Classic are six and in Sanskrit there are eight (Nominative, Accusative, Instrumental, Dative, Ablative, Genitive, Locative and Vocative).

² Sanskrit grammar has three genders: masculine, feminine and neutral.

³ Literally, the masculine noun विपाकः-*vipākah* means, "cooking," "ripening," or "development." Derivative of the verbal root विपच्-*vipach* "to mature", "to cook" or "to develop". Figuratively, the term is used in the sense of "consequence", "result", or "retribution".

soon the retribution (*vipākah*) will occur. This law is so associated with the concept of karma that it is common to find authors identifying the law of karma with karma itself. Therefore, karma is not a simple action without implications, much more than this, it is a conception of action and its maturation (*vipāka*) with effects in the future, whose virtuous acts of body, speech and thought produce happiness, in this life and / or in the next lives; while vicious acts lead to suffering. According to the different Indian systems, the judgment of the actions of the agents is done by the Law of Karma itself, which has its own dynamics for this. On the other hand, according to theistic systems, by a god who judges the merits of actions and then sends the retributions or misfortunes to the authors (for an explanation on this topic, see: Reichenbach, 1980).⁴

In the older literature of the Hindus, the Vedic literature, karma, in the sense above, is only vaguely mentioned (to know more, see: O'Flaherty, 1980: 03-37 and Tull, 1989). The earliest clear mention in upanishadic literature appears in the *Brhadāranyaka Upanishad* VI.04.04-5: साधुकारी साधुर्भवति. पापकारी पापो भवति. पुण्यः पुण्येन कर्मणा पापः

⁴ Theosophical literature mentions the existence of the *Lipikas* (Lords of *Karma*), who are scribes who imprint on the invisible tablets of the astral light the records of all the acts and thoughts of men, of all that has happened, and of all that will happen in the universe. They are also judges of human actions. The term *Lipika* (लिपिक) is of Sanskrit origin and means, "clerk," "scribe," "writer," or "scribe". It does not appear in the Sanskrit literature in the sense of "heavenly scribe"; this latter sense is a creation of the Theosophists.

पापेन - *sādhukārī sādhubhavadī pāpakārī pāpo bhavadī punyah puniena karmanā pāpah pāpena*, "What a man is transformed depends on how he acts and behaves. If your actions are good, it will turn into something good. If your actions are bad, it will turn into something bad. A man becomes something good for his good deeds and something bad for his bad deeds" (Olivelle, 1998: 120 and 121).⁵

The definition of karma varies from one author to another therefore there is no consensus. Wendy D. O'Flaherty enumerated the following six essential constituents, which should compose a theory of karma (O'Flaherty, 1980: xi), after successive discussions among specialists with the intention of elaborating a definition of karma according to Indian culture:

1. Causality (ethical and non-ethical, involving one life or several lives).
2. Ethinization: (the belief that good or bad acts lead to certain results in one life or several lives).
3. Rebirth.
4. Explanation for present circumstances with reference to previous actions, including (possibly) actions prior to birth.
5. Orientation of present actions toward future ends, including (possibly) those occurring after death and

⁵ A similar phrase appears in another passage of this same upanixade (III.02.13): पुण्यो वै पुण्येन भवति पापः पापेनेति - *punyo vai punyena bhavadī pāpah pāpeneti* - A man becomes good for his good deed and something bad for his bad deed" (Olivelle, 1998: 80 and 81).

6. Moral basis on which past or present is predicated.

In short, in a certain sense and for some purposes, belief in karma has a comforting role, that is, of convincing those disgruntled with injustices in the world that, despite apparent injustice and inequality, there is another justice beyond our eyes, which corrects this minor injustice, making life just and people deserving of their lot. By thus justifying suffering and happiness through non-arbitrary reasons and logical motives, thus proclaiming that this world is finally a fair place.

Classification of Karmic Actions

In the Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, the idea of karma is classified in different ways. According to the moment, the karma can be classified thus:

1. *Prārabdham karman* (प्रारब्धं कर्मन्): it is that karma inherited from past lives that is ready to mature, which cannot be avoided, is only extinguished when it is fulfilled.

2. *Sanchitam karman* (सञ्चितं कर्मन्): it is the accumulated karma of the past that has not yet developed its effects. It is seen partly in the character of the individual, in his powers, in his weaknesses and in his capacities. This karma can be altered to some extent, especially through spiritual practices, which dissipate accumulated karma.

3. *Vartamānam karman* (वर्तमानं कर्मन्): it is karma being created at the moment, whose individual has complete control, so it can be avoided.

A classification according to the nature of the results (*vipākas*) is as follows:

1. *Kushala karma* (कुशल कर्म): karma that leads to beneficial results (*vipākas*).
2. *Akushala karma* (अकुशल कर्म): karma that leads to evil results.
3. *Kushalākushala karma* (कुशलाकुशल कर्म): karma that leads to mixed results, which may be partially beneficial and partially malefic.
4. *Avyākṛta karma* (अव्याकृत कर्म): karma that does not manifest, whose actions after enlightenment do not produce results in the conditioned world (*samsāra*).

A classification as to mode of operation, extracted from the Pali literature:

1. *Janaka kamma* (जनक कम्म):⁶ This is creative karma, which creates future actions, in this life and in the next lives.
2. *Upatthambhaka kamma* (उपत्थम्भक कम्म): the karma that supports, which assists and maintains the results (*vipākas*) of the existing karma.
3. *Upapīḍaka kamma* (उपपीडक कम्म): opposing karma is that which weakens, interrupts and delays the enjoyment of the karma of creation (*janaka kamma*).
4. *Upaghātaka kamma* (उपघातक कम्म): karma destroyer, this karma is strong enough to oppose and neutralize the other karmas, can also replace the current karma by another. This can be good or bad.

⁶ Like Sanskrit and other Indian languages, the Pali language can also be written in the alphabet *devanāgarī* (देवनागरी).

As for the priority of the effect:

1. *Garuka kamma* (गरुक कम्म):⁷ this is the most important karma (*gariman*-गरिमन्), which can be good (*punnakamma*-पुञ्जकम्म) or evil (*pāpakamma*-पापकम्म). These virtues and sins have priority in producing the effects.

2. *Lahuka kamma* (लहुक कम्म): this is the minor karma, so it has no priority in producing the effects.

The Debate

Among so many others, there is at present a debate among scholars on the question of whether the idea of karma can be a theory or even a doctrine; or whether it is just a belief, a dogma or a superstition. Then, from the perspectives of the opposing points of view, opinions are divided as follows: for supporters and for confessional authors, karma is enthusiastically proclaimed as a reality, whereas, for skeptics, karma is aptly pointed out as a dogma.

The difficulty of considering karma as a theory, from the classical Hindu, Buddhist and Jain works, is that there is not even a treatise, in the extensive literature of these traditions, exclusive to the subject of karma. What exists are only mentions in short passages, sometimes during dialogues between master and disciple, or through myths and metaphors, not always coherent, whose

⁷ The adjective pali *garuka* (गरुक) is derived from the Sanskrit term *gariman* (गरिमन्), which literally means "weight", therefore *garuka* literally means "heavy", but much used in both languages in the figurative sense of importance, gravity or dignity.

works proclaim, rather than explain, the idea of karma. The concern of the classical authors has always been to focus on the soteriological aspect, that is, the liberation of karma, than to elaborate explanatory theories on the nature and the operation of karma. The sutras and other Buddhist texts are plenty of passages where the theme of karma is mentioned, but never through a deep explanation in the manner of a systematic treatise. In addition, in *Bhagavad Gītā*, karma is mentioned in some passages in a more proclamatory and poetic way than an explanatory way. A little more information is found in the exegetical literature (*kārikās*, *bhāṣyas*, *tīkāś*, *vṛttis* and *vimarśinīs*). Therefore, the idea of gathering all these sparse ideas in Indian works into an organized and coherent theory of karma is an attempt by recent authors. Of all the attempts, perhaps the works of the Theosophist Annie W. Besant are the closest to what we could now call, if we are very complacent, as "theory of karma",⁸ exposed from the theosophical point of view.

Another complication in the debates lies in the diversity of interpretations for the nature and operation of karma proposed by religious interpreters and sympathizers of the subject. Multiplicity results in the fact that the discussion is undertaken from an interpretation by an author, which differs from others, sometimes even within the same religion known by other interlocutors of the debate, which makes consensus difficult. For

⁸ The most articulate and in-depth exposition is *A Study in Karma*, first edition 1912.

example, see Monima Chadha's (2007) and Nick Trakakis's objection to Whitley's paper (Kaufman, 2005), where the former deal with the subject from a more religious perspective, while the latter from a more philosophical and legal perspective, both extracting their notions about karma from distinct sources.

Even more complicated is the fanciful creativity of modern adepts in creating new explanations, from the experiences of channeling and mediumship, about the functioning of karma. The abstract and axiological nature, as well as the imperceptible way of operation of karma, facilitates the freedom to create phenomena and fanciful explanations, due to the lack of concreteness and the impossibility of confirmation. Thus, channelers and mediums are at all times creating new ideas about karma according to the experiences they reveal. Therefore, someone is always able to create a new argument to support his belief as well as find a way to challenge the view of the other, depending on the diversity of interpretations.

In debates between religious, within the scope of the confrontation between beliefs of different currents, an advantage of the doctrine of karma on the conceptions of those who do not recognize their existence, pointed out by reincarnationists, is the opportunity, through many rebirths, to repair the errors, whereas in biblical religions the individual has only one life to attain salvation. Therefore, if the individual does not attain salvation in his one life, he will have no other chance of attaining salvation, since reincarnation is not accepted. Now, imagine then the cases of those who die suddenly very young, they will have

no other opportunity. Conclusion, a wasted life. Thus, believers in karma claim that this is more just than the biblical doctrine of resurrection.⁹

Karma and Faith

As mentioned above, karma is not a fact whose clues can be traced in order to find evidence of its reality, since no concrete evidence in favor of its existence is possible to obtain, especially because of the lack of memory of lives past. Thus, the conception of karma remains limited to the realm of faith. Moreover, with the impossibility of proving also the existence of rebirth, since both are mutually dependent, the reality of karma becomes even more impossible.

So, when religious, religion teachers, and philosophers discuss about karma, what they are doing is building a number of logical and complex arguments, which go as far as the minute, often very coherent details, but arguments constructed on the fragile foundation of belief, which after all is not firmly supported. That is, one interlocutor argues with one belief, for another to challenge through another belief, a confrontation of beliefs, a situation that reminds us of the debates of medieval priests. Thus, some of these debates are about karma and divine grace, karma and divine forgiveness, karma and god, karma and faith, karma and the origin of evil and other confrontations of religious beliefs.

⁹ Kardecist spiritists claim to find references to reincarnation in the Bible, but it is still a subject under discussion.

The Memory Problem

The conception of karma incorporates several obstacles. One of the most serious was taken by Whitley R. P. Kaufman on "past memory problem" (Kaufman, 2005: 19-21), for promotion of karmic justice. For justice to be effective, it needs someone who is suffering from a crime committed in a past life to be aware of his crime and to understand why he is being punished. Since this recall does not happen, it is not fair to be punished or rewarded for something that he does not know the reason for the punishment or the reward. In everyday life, an accused person remembers and knows exactly why he is being charged, or even a child when warned by his father. Finally, the fact that the perpetrator of crime or virtue never knows why he is being punished or rewarded does not represent a form of justice, although the author can believe that every criminal act is punished in another life or virtue is rewarded, does not do justice exactly. Therefore, he does not know the crime he committed his seriousness and even, if what he did was a crime or not.

To be sure, this belief violates the basic principle of justice that no one can be punished for a crime that is not known, that is cannot be reconstituted, has no witnesses, and no material evidence. Without remembrance of past lives, he who is being punished will not be able to know whether the suffering he is going through is immorality or a crime committed in this life, or in his childhood, or in his youth, or in the previous life or in many lives past. For these reasons, the doctrine of karma, according to Kaufman, seems more an

act of revenge than an act of justice (Kaufman, 2005: 20).

And what is more absurd, not knowing the crime he committed in his previous life, because of his inability to remember, the author is not capable of confessing the crime, repenting, trying to repair the damage, trying to compensate or compensate, to portray, which would be morally educational for the alleged criminal. In short, only a vague knowledge that one has committed a criminal act, just as believers in reincarnation claim to be sufficient, which one does not remember, is not sufficient to bring about justice completely.

Monima Chadha and Nick Trakakis, along with other karmic justice advocates, based on arguments drawn from Indian beliefs, challenge W. Kaufman's criticism that a criminal does not need to remember his crime to be punished. Chadha and Trakakis mentioned the example of "a drunk driver who runs over a pedestrian and then collides with a pole. The driver then goes into a coma as a result of the collision, and when he regains consciousness, he does not remember what happened and his intoxications." So, according to them, cannot the driver be tried and punished for not remembering the crime he committed? Soon after they argued that "the theory of karma, likewise, requires us to recognize our past mistakes, but not to remember them in detail and hence to repent for it." In other words, it is enough to recognize vaguely that we have erred in the past that the law of karma is ready to apply its justice. Now this is a very precarious notion of justice, for it only vaguely recognizes our errors of the past, without knowing the details, this is

superficial justice. If so, the justice of karma is immensely more unjust than the justice of men.

Someone who does not remember or knows of the crime he committed may well be tried and punished, for in absence of this remembrance or knowledge there are witnesses and evidences (in the case of the above example: the crashed car, the damaged post, the victim's injuries and / or death certificate, forensic evidence, photos and / or videos of the accident, etc.). So that the crime can be reconstituted and then reported to the accused who has forgotten the details of the brutal crime that he committed. In conclusion, the accused may have the reconstitution and remembrance of his crime before his eyes. Now, in the case of the punishment of the law of karma for crime committed in a previous life, none of this is possible.

Moreover, in order to be exactly just, karmic retribution must follow a pattern of proportion between the gravity of the crime and its punishment, as well as between the merit of the virtue committed and its reward. Since remembering past lives does not happen, we cannot know whether the punishments and rewards we receive are exactly proportional to immorality and virtues respectively. In short, the idea of karma does not promote justice with fairness, but rather with vagueness.

Final Considerations

The idea of karma has always played a domineering role over the followers of a religion that accepts it, for the first lesson that an adept

learns about karma is to conform to his lot (karma). Conformed to his karma, the adept becomes submissive, which opens the way for religion to exercise its power over the adept. The idea of karma has a subjugating power, for an individual conformed to his fate is much easier to be mastered than a rebel unhappy with his misfortune.

In addition, it is curious to observe how all the doctrines of karma recognize, approve and legitimize the divisions of social classes created by men: poor and rich, cultured and uneducated, monarchs and commoners, oppressors and oppressed, as well as religious castes. Something as if karma were a natural law, but drawn from human ideas. In Hinduism, for example, the unjust caste system is legitimized by the Hindu doctrine of karma, that is, each one is born into a caste according to law of karma. Birth in a lower caste is justified by karma; it is a merit, so that at no time the system of caste division is seen as an injustice, but rather as a just merit by actions in past lives. Without even knowing what he did right or wrong in previous lives, the Hindu readily conforms to higher or lower birth, because of his belief in law of karma.

Without opening his eyes to the blindness of conformity with the Law of Karma, the adept does not perceive the injustice embedded in the systems of class division and, with this, they do not mobilize to modify the inequalities. In short, the idea of karma has triumphed and survived to the present day because of its comforting and at the same time subjugating power over those unhappy with the injustice of life.

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